

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000948

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/04/2015

TAGS: [PGOV TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAI ELECTIONS: PROMINENT DEMOCRAT PARTY
CANDIDATES IN TOUGH FIGHTS IN SOUTHERN CONSTITUENCIES

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT J. CLARKE. REASON: 1.4 (D)

1. (C) Summary: Dr. Surin Phitsuwon, Democrat (DP) party luminary and former Foreign Minister under the Chuan Leekpai administration, is waging a tough fight for election to Parliament in a traditionally DP Nakhon Si Thammarat constituency. He faces a well-funded, younger Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party challenger. Surin, one of the DP's more articulate and internationally known officials, told poloff on February 2 that the TRT is using illegal campaign tactics and legal intimidation to hobble his campaign. He admitted that his decision to run for the constituency in place of the incumbent, his sister, had attracted accusations of "carpetbagging" and that this was hurting him. In a constituency in nearby Phang-nga province, on the Andaman Sea coast, Prime Minister Thaksin's response to the recent tsunami disaster has won him points and could have an impact

SIPDIS

on DP incumbent Jurit Luksanawisit's chances. While no one is willing to predict outright a TRT upset in either Nakhon Si Thammarat or Phang-nga, DP candidates in these areas are in the unaccustomed and uncomfortable position of having real competition. End Summary.

PROMINENT DP CANDIDATE SWITCHES FROM PARTY LIST TO CONTEST CONSTITUENCY SEAT

2. (SBU) On February 1-2, Poloff and PolFSN visited two constituencies, one in Nakhon Si Thammarat and the other in Phang-nga. Both have long been held by the opposition Democrat Party, but both DP candidates are being heavily challenged by the Thai Rak Thai party. In Nakhon Si Thammarat's first constituency, incumbent Huwaiyda Phitsuwon stepped aside so that her brother, nationally prominent DP politician Surin Phitsuwon, could run for her constituency. Most observers believe that Surin felt that Huwaiyda would lose against the well-placed TRT candidate -- Kanop Ketchap, son of the powerful mayor of Nakhon Si Thammarat. With indications that the TRT was targeting the constituency as an opportunity "trophy" seat in the DP-dominated south, Surin asked to step in for Huwaiyda. In return, the DP offered her a party list candidacy. Party list seats are 100 national, non-constituency seats awarded proportionately to those parties who pick up five percent or more of the separate countrywide vote on party lists. Surin had held a party list seat in Parliament before opting to run for his sister's seat.

COMPLAINTS OF "CARPETBAGGING

3. (C) Surin has served as an MP for Nakhon Si Thammarat since 1986. His most recent term, from 2001 to 2005, had been as a party list candidate. Surin is by his own admission having a tough fight. During lunch with poloff, he complained that his decision to run for the constituency seat in place of his sister has evinced accusations of his being a "carpetbagger." Surin said that the TRT machine is painting him as essentially uninterested in working for the constituency's interests, but rather ambitious to use the seat for his own national political agenda. He also noted that some of the DP voters in the constituency, upset because he had taken his popular sister's place, were threatening to withhold their votes from Surin.

CLAIMS STRONG TACTICS BY OPPONENTS

4. (C) Surin told poloff that his supporters are also being intimidated by the TRT. His TRT opponent's father is Mayor of Nakhon Si Thammarat. Posters for Surin's candidacy are being destroyed regularly and, he complained, the Provincial Election Commission has been unresponsive. "My supporters are afraid to show their support for me in some areas," Surin claimed. Surin said that over 4,000 voters cast their ballots as "early voters," an unusually high number of persons taking advantage of the procedure that allows voters who are unable to vote on election day to vote before then.

5. (C) Surin said that vote buying by TRT canvassers is rampant, with phone cards in many cases replacing baht notes as the currency. Surin noted wryly that though voters in southern Thailand are justifiably known to show more party loyalty than in other regions of Thailand, money is money, and some of his potential supporters will be swayed. In the case of TRT, anything goes, said Surin. He added that he has

to be careful in his speeches because the TRT is trying to muzzle him legally. Surin said that he had to appear before the election commission the following day to explain complaints by the TRT that he had "vilified" his opponent in his speeches. (note: Surin told poloff that he merely pointed out to his audience that he was for honesty and transparency in government and that voters wanted these values in government they should vote for him and not the TRT candidate.)

TRT CANDIDATE SAYS POLITICS ARE LOCAL

16. (SBU) Surin's TRT opponent Kanop told poloff that he will adhere to a straightforward theme: to represent directly the interests of Nakhon Si Thammarat's citizens -- traffic, flood control, tourism development. He said he will have the advantage of being a member of a strong government that is able to get things done. The DP candidate would not have the access that he would and the voters understand that, he said. They also know that if elected he will focus on the voters' local issues, not matters of national policy. Kanop said that he is a "local son" who has returned to his home town from abroad (University of Colorado Civil Engineering).

...AND TOUTS YOUTH AND "COMMON TOUCH"

17. (SBU) Kanop, a young-looking 32 year old, told poloff that he is reaching out to young voters (he had just come from a local college to meet with poloff), portraying himself as a change from old-style politics. He said that he hoped that the parents of young voters (voter eligibility is 18 in Thailand) will follow their children's lead and vote for change. Kanop added that rather than the traditional mass rallies, he had mounted a door-to-door campaign in order to let the voters see and hear his message up close. (Note: That evening, former Prime Minister and DP leader Chuan Leekpai came to Nakhon Si Thammarat to support Surin at a mass rally. End note.)

18. (SBU) Nakhon Si Thammarat Election Commission members told poloff that no election-related violence had occurred so far in constituency one and that there had been only a few complaints of election fraud - most made by candidates against their opponents. Commission Chairman Somboon Promphan expressed confidence to poloff in the commission's ability to manage the process, having learned from experience in the 2001 general election. They told poloff that the commission's control over the process is stricter than 2001 and that the commission has vote fraud investigative teams stationed in each constituency in the country.

WAYS TO A MEANS - VOTE BUYING

19. (C) Supha Thippharat, regional head of Pollwatch, an Election Commission-funded organization mandated to observe the activities of candidates, the local election commission and related government officials, told poloff that supporters from both sides were trying to influence voters through handouts. One tactic was to hand prospective voters 20 Baht notes (approx. 40 baht equals one U.S. dollar) with a unique stamp on it. The recipient is told that if the named candidate wins, the stamped 20 baht note can be redeemed for a 1,000 baht note. Another tactic is to task the voter with taking a cell phone equipped with a camera into the voting booth to record that he or she had indeed marked the ballot for the "right" party, allowing for payment.

EARLY VOTERS - EARLY FRAUD?

110. (C) Supha also noted Surin's suspicions about the large numbers of early voters. She agreed that the number appeared to be unusually high for constituency one. In earlier elections about one thousand persons voted early in constituency one. This election the number was about 4,400, according to Supha. She raised the question of possible fraud, saying that Pollwatch had been informed that many of the early voters had been brought in from Nakhon Si Thammarat's tenth constituency, where numerous cases of voter list name duplication existed. She opined that TRT had exploited this situation and had arranged transport for these fraudulent voters to the first constituency.

THAKSIN'S TSUNAMI PERFORMANCE HELPING TRT CANDIDATE IN PHANG-NGA

111. (SBU) Another DP incumbent, Jurit Luksanawisit, is facing a tough challenge in the first constituency of Phang-nga province. This province, also traditionally DP as in Nakhon Si Thammarat, was particularly hard hit by the recent tsunami. According to Supha and other observers, Jurit's TRT opponent, Krit Seefah, is receiving a bump in support from voters because of what was considered the quick and decisive actions by Thaksin's government following the tsunami. Jurit, like Surin, is a prominent DP politician and

an upset by the TRT in his constituency would represent a real coup for Thaksin.

TSUNAMI COMPLICATING ELECTION PROCESS IN PHANG-NGA

SIPDIS

12. (C) Election officials with whom poloff spoke in Phang-nga said that there has been relatively little evidence of vote-buying and virtually no violence in the constituency. Commission Chairman Prasoet Kuadkitchakan's biggest concern is over the potential for voter fraud. Prasoet said that the Phang-nga Election Commission believes that because of the chaotic circumstances of the December 26 tsunami, large number of those Phang-nga residents killed have not been reported to the commission. This leaves open the possibility of voter fraud through use of deceased persons' identification documents. The Commission members also told poloff that they had problems locating enough suitable polling sites to replace those destroyed by the tsunami.

13. (C) Comment: TRT appears to be mounting a full court press in these two high-profile southern constituencies. They are traditional DP strongholds and, while no one we spoke to is willing to predict outright a TRT upset in Nakhon Si Thammarat or Phang-nga, the DP candidates in these areas know they are fighting real contests.

BOYCE